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ABSTRACT

This report attempts to demonstrate that dropouts follow a path inverse to the one that students follow to academic excellence by presenting a review of literature pertaining to dropouts and students at risk. It examines the process by which at-risk students are separated from academic excellence, and attempts to understand the factors behind academic excellence and student achievement within the context of findings relating to at-risk students and dropouts. The following subjects are addressed in the literature review: (1) the characteristics of at-risk students; (2) the causes of the dropout rate, both internal and external to school; (3) effective methods of dropout prevention and support programs for at-risk students; and (4) academic excellence based on findings about at-risk students. The results from each section of the review are discussed. The complete review indicates that programs designed to support at-risk students and programs that effectively encourage academic excellence are strikingly similar in most respects. In addition, the process through which at-risk students drop out corresponds to the process through which students move towards academic excellence. Further research, particularly with ethnographic methodology, on the parallels and differences between dropouts and high achievers is recommended. Six figures and a list of 70 references are included. (JS)

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FROM DROPOUT TO HIGH ACHIEVER:
An Understanding of Academic Excellence Through an Analysis of Dropouts and Students-at Risk

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Abstract

A review of literature pertaining to dropouts and students-at-risk was conducted in order to 1) examine the process by which students-at-risk are separated from academic excellence, and 2) understand the factors behind academic excellence and student achievement within the context of findings relating to students-at-risk and dropouts. The document itself is divided into four parts: 1) the characteristics of students-at-risk, 2) the causes of the dropout rate, 3) a discussion of effective methods of dropout prevention and support programs for students-at-risk, and 4) a discussion of academic excellence based on findings about students-at-risk and dropouts. After the review was completed, it was clear that programs designed to support students-at-risk and programs that effectively encourage academic excellence are strikingly similar in most respects. In addition, it was found that the process through which students-at-risk drop out corresponds with the process through which students move towards academic excellence. Further research, particularly with ethnographic methodology, on the parallels and differences between dropouts and high achievers was recommended. An extensive bibliography is provided.

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Executive Summary

This study has been funded by a grant from the Cowell Foundation. This grant also includes ethnographic research on low and high achievers in a high school from U.S./Mexico border community. A review of literature pertaining to dropouts and students-at-risk was conducted in order to 1) examine the process by which students-at-risk are separated from academic excellence, and 2) understand the factors behind academic excellence and student achievement within the context of findings relating to students-at-risk and dropouts. The document itself is divided into four parts : 1) the characteristics of students-at-risk, 2) the causes of the dropout rate, 3) a discussion of effective methods of dropout prevention and support programs for students-at-risk, and 4) a discussion of academic excellence based on findings about students-at-risk and dropouts. The results of each section of the review were as follows.

In the first section, it was concluded that students-at-risk have the following characteristics: 1) frustration with school, 2) poor academic records, 3) discipline and attendance problems, 4) a disadvantaged social and economic level, and 5) low aspirations with an even poorer self-concept. In addition, 6) they are disproportionately represented by minority groups.

The second section found that causes of the dropout phenomenon are rooted in both internal (school-related) and external (primarily family and socioeconomic conditions) factors. External factors include 1) having parents with little or no education, 2) having siblings who have dropped out, 3) a dearth of family support, 4) limited proficiency in English, and 5) early marriage and/or pregnancy. School-related (internal) factors include 1) having poor academic performance, 2) having a low level of reading and writing skills, 3) finding a culturally hostile environment, and 4) an inability to identify cohesively with teachers and peers.

Findings for the third section of the review indicate that most successful dropout prevention programs have the following organizational characteristics: 1) well-trained teachers and staff, 2) program autonomy, 3) individualized instruction, 4) small size, 5) team teaching, 6) a program of incentives, 7) community involvement, and 8) early identification. In a curricular context, successful programs exhibited: 1) non-traditional ideas, and 2) experimental methods. Relational recommendations (those dealing with the affective, emotional domain) were as follows: 1) provide a positive school atmosphere, 2) establish or improve mentorship and counseling.

Concerning academic excellence, the review found that programs designed to support students-at-risk and programs that effectively encourage academic excellence are strikingly similar in most respects. In addition, it was found that the

process through which students-at-risk drop out corresponds with the process through which students move towards academic excellence. Further research, particularly with ethnographic methodology, on the parallels and differences between dropouts and high achievers was recommended. An extensive bibliography is provided.

Introduction

During the last decade several major national studies have been conducted concerning the quality of education in our nation's public schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983; Carnegie, 1986). In nearly all of these studies there is a consensus on at least two points: 1) there is a lack of quality in the work of the majority of students and consequently lower scholastic proficiency; and 2) minorities, particularly Hispanics and others with language barriers, have consistently shown a significantly lower level of scholastic achievement even when standards are already very low.

The Cowell Foundation was interested in advancing toward a local or regional solution of the problem in the border area, Calexico, California, U. S. and Mexicali, B. C. Mexico, by supporting a project that goes beyond the typical frame of researching, presenting results, and offering recommendations. After various unsuccessful proposals from the staff at the Institute for Borders Studies to the Cowell Foundation, a project was finally funded which integrated three phases.

1) A binational (U. S. and Mexico) review of the literature related to academic excellence, which was to be synthesized in a document. This would provide direction for the second phase of the project.

2) An ethnographic study of public secondary school high achievers and low achievers in the cities of Calexico, California and Mexicali, B. C. Mexico. The findings were to be presented in a second document.

3) Finally, two panels of experts, one for Mexicali, Mexico and one for Calexico, California, comprised of representatives from the educational community, that would

study both documents. In separate meetings each panel would offer recommendations to design and develop a model to promote academic excellence in both Calexico and Mexicali.

It was hoped that the models will provide direction and concrete courses of action for Calexico Unified School District in California, and in Mexicali, Baja California, schools in Mexico to follow towards academic excellence.

The first step of the review was to determine a definition for "academic excellence." This would provide a list of principal and related topics that would serve to compile a comprehensive binational review of the literature available in this area of study. Academic excellence, in this context, was defined as: *optimum scholastic achievement in a given group*. Thus, anything preventing or promoting scholastic achievement was within the scope of our research. Once this was done, two compilers, one for the United States and one for Mexico, were hired to obtain information.

Soon it became evident that the national educational scene in the United States was focused on low achievers. In fact, the prevalent topics in educational literature proved to be the investigation of drop-outs, push-outs, and students-at-risk. Not only are these students low achievers, and consequently far distant from academic excellence, but they are on the verge of leaving school altogether. In Mexico, a very limited amount of material was located and even less was in fact available. Mexico lacks a national or regional information center, thus, materials are scattered throughout the country. Furthermore, many researchers and research centers did not respond to our inquiries.

Unquestionably, drop-out rates in the nation have reached a scandalous level among the minority population (Hahn and Danzberger, 1987; Robledo, 1989). Taking into account the

local situation in Calexico, which reflects the 81 percent Hispanic student population and 40 percent student attrition rate of the Imperial Valley (Martin, 1990), the following document attempts to summarize the findings of a search providing:

1) characteristics of students-at-risk.

2) causes of the dropout rate.

3) discussion of methods which seem to have proven successful in preventing dropouts.

4) discussion of academic excellence based on the findings about students-at-risk and dropouts.

This document attempts to demonstrate that dropouts follow a path that is the inverse path students follow to academic excellence. Therefore, an understanding of dropouts and students-at-risk will yield valuable insight into the theory and practice of academic excellence.

At-Risk!: Being On the Wrong Side

Being at-risk means being diametrically opposite from obtaining academic excellence (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 *Dropping-out and academic excellence are on opposite extremes.*

In more conventional terms, a student is at-risk when he or she has the tendency to disregard and ultimately drop-out of school.

Research performed on students who drop-out reveals consistency in the following characteristics (California State Department of Education, 1986; Wehlage and Rutter, 1986):

1) They are frustrated with school.

2) They have poor academic records.

3) They have discipline problems.

4) They have a disadvantaged economic and social level

5) They are often members of a minority, particularly Native American, Hispanic, or Black groups.

6) low aspirations and inferior self-concept.

1) FRUSTRATION WITH SCHOOL

At the heart of the problem of drop-outs is a frustration with teachers, classes, homework, and school in general. Early in their lives a series of events begins to signal difficulties which gradually increase to a critical point sometime between their freshmen and junior high school years.

Dropping out of school is regarded as a liberating action by many students (Durken, 1981). Several authors have concluded that there are many reasons for drop-outs to dislike schools (Rumberger, 1986; Hahn & Danzberger, 1987). Among the most cited reasons are: unmotivated students not receiving in their courses the instruction they are truly interested in; failure to achieve in school any kind of success; and improper treatment of students by teachers and other school staff. While no single reason is directly discernible as the main cause of frustration, most probably a

combination of the above-mentioned reasons provide enough evidence to explain the phenomenon (Orr, 1987).

2) POOR ACADEMIC RECORD

Dislike for school evolves soon into a poor scholastic record. The most consistent pattern in the literature about students-at-risk was their deficient academic record. Research indicates that students who have poor grades, miss homeworks, do not participate in class discussions, demonstrate a low reading level, and have a general attitude of disregard for school work, are most likely to drop-out (Hewett & Johnson, 1979; Schriber, 1979; Durken, 1981; Martin, 1981; Natriello, 1985). Featherstone (1986) provided a through review of the correlation between grade retention and dropouts. Schrieber (1976) reports that a majority of dropouts repeated a grade in elementary school. A close connection between early academic failure and eventual dropping out was observed by Trobb (1985) in a longitudinal study of students entering high school in New York city. Though a poor academic record is not necessarily directly related to participation or lack of participation in extracurricular activities, several researchers have found that students-at-risk tend to have limited or no participation in school activities (Schreiber, 1979; Martin, 1981).

A relevant finding to consider is that the relationship between standardized test scores and students-at-risk is of secondary importance (Hahn, 1987). In conclusion, using the depiction on Fig. 1, it appears that a student-at-risk increases his or her danger of becoming a dropout as he or she moves from the right to the left of this line, passing through recognizable stages of poor school performance (See Fig. 2).

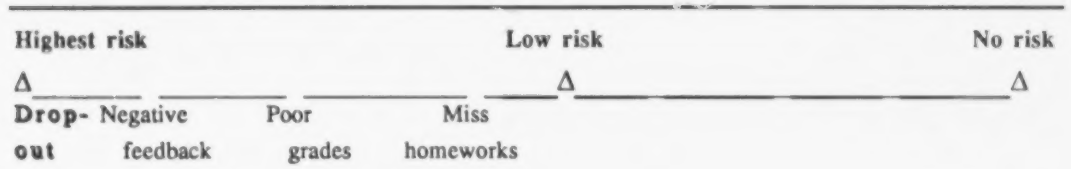

Figure 2 *Recognizable stations of poor school performance of students-at-risk.*

3) DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

Schools clearly have marked socialization effects which include submission, control, order, acceptance, and silence (Hodkinson, 1985). Schools offer a hostile environment to students-at-risk (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1985; Mills, et.al., 1988). This produces a gradual withdrawing of students-at-risk from everything associated with school. A number of them turn to conscious or unconscious rebellion, which in turn produces frequent expulsion, truancy, and other discipline problems (Hodgkinson, 1985; Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986). Therefore, a number of studies suggests a strong association between discipline problems and dropouts, and dropout prevention programs commonly include sections with recommendations to strengthen discipline (Self, 1985; Georgia State Department of Education, 1988; Texas Education Agencies, 1988). Other studies have demonstrated that discipline is only a minor consideration in students' decision to leave schools (Peng & Takai, 1983; Maruca, 1989). This latter argument, endorsing a disassociation between dropouts and discipline is supported by the fact that many students do have discipline problems without being at-risk. The relationship between students-at-risk and discipline is further complicated by the fact that many secondary schools do not differentiate between problems with attendance and problems with discipline. While the great majority of students-at-risk do experience problems with attendance (Illinois State Task Force on Hispanic Student Dropout, 1985; Feld et.al., 1987; Baherman & Kopp, 1988; Texas Education

Agency, 1988) they do not experience other discipline problems as frequently. Thus, they experience the full force of the school disciplinary system which adds to the many difficulties they are confronted with. This only exacerbates the situation for the student-at-risk.

4) DISADVANTAGED ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL LEVEL

If discipline problems may not necessarily be a characteristic of students-at-risk, a disadvantaged economic level is conclusively a factor associated with dropouts which has consensus among researchers. McCormick (1989) defines the problems of youth at-risk in terms of poverty, including: transience and homelessness, single-parenthood, health difficulties, substance abuse, youth unemployment, and juvenile crime. Practically all studies alluding to economic and social class concurred in finding that dropouts had a disadvantaged social and economic status (Durken, 1981; Martin, 1981; Education Commission of the States, 1988; Council of Chief State School Officers, 1988). Thus, students-at-risk are associated with poverty, poverty with minorities, minorities with Blacks and Hispanics and the latter to language difficulties. In fact, a significant body of research has conclusively shown that there is an association between poor achievement and language difficulties (Cummins, 1986; Trueba, 1987; Eckstrom et. al. 1986).

5) MEMBER OF A MINORITY, PARTICULARLY, NATIVE AMERICAN, HISPANIC OR BLACK

With the exception of Asian Americans, student members of ethnic minorities are in considerably more risk to drop-out and have lower achievement scores than other students (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986; Maruca, 1989). Statistics reviewed by Peng (1985) claimed that Hispanic double the amount of Black dropouts.

6) LOW ASPIRATIONS AND INFERIOR SELF-CONCEPT

The typical dropout has minimal educational aspirations and has a very poor selfimage (Eckstrom, et. al. 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). Sometime in their lives they were convinced that they were not for schools and schools were not for them. Every thing they do in school appears to reinforce the idea that they can not make it.

According to Schreiber (1979) a potential dropout is insecure; feels that his or her teachers or peers do not respect him or her; and has aspirations that are constantly lowered. Maruca (1989) found that the vast majority of dropouts were not living in a family or group with a high school graduate, and Durken (1981) discovered that students-at-risk have aspirations of obtaining employment similar to that of their parents.

Causes

Several major reports have attempted to group the causes for dropping out in three broad categories: student's family conditions, economic factors, and school experiences. (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986).

Family conditions include:

1) Parents uneducated or with limited education.

2) Siblings who have dropout.

3) Absence of or limited English proficiency.

4) Lack of or deficient support.

5) Marriage, or pregnancy including being a single parent.

Economic factors comprise:

1) Being a member of a poor family, and/ having to work to help the family.

School related causes play a major role. Leading the reasons is:

1) Poor academic performance.

2) Low reading level.

3) A culturally hostile environment.

4) Inability to get along with teachers and peers.

5) Dislike or lack of interest in school in general.

Actually, family and economic reasons both are conditions outside the direct influence of the school. Additionally, both are so closely related that it is difficult to categorize some causes as either one or the other, e.g., parents with limited education; or having to work to help the family. In view of this, a more appropriate division of causes could be: External causes, which would include family and economic conditions; and Internal causes, encompassing all school related causes.

According to Wittenberg (1988), external causes (family and economic factor) are the areas emphasized in dropout prevention. In spite of this, recent studies appear to suggest that family and economic conditions, though consistently present in the profile of student-at-risk, play only an indirect role in the quandary that concludes with dropping out (Flaxman & Riehl, 1987; Kurtz, 1988).

Hence, the major causes for dropping out of school are well identified. They follow a logical sequence and lead to a predictable consequence. This progression can be portrayed graphically as a "loser's" circle (See Fig.3).

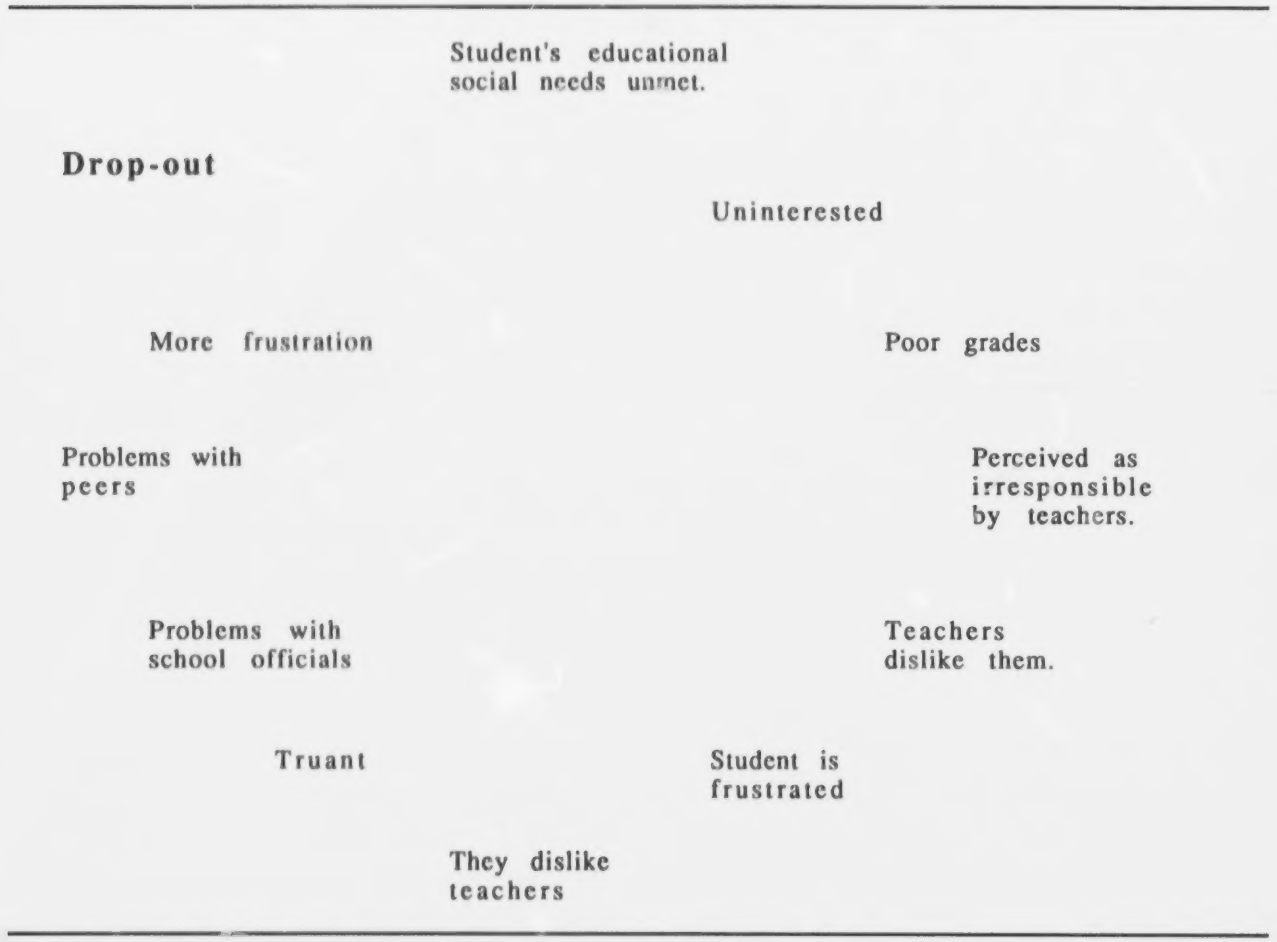

Fig. 3 *The loser's circle of a drop-out.*

The social and educational needs of students-at-risk are not met. This makes the students unmotivated and rapidly begins to whittle away at their interest in school in general. Their lack of interest make them obtain poor grades. Teachers perceive them as irresponsible and the fulfilling cycle is in motion. Failure after failure creates

frustration, which in turn begins to withdraw students-at-risk from teachers and other peers. School is perceived as a hostile environment which provides a setting for them to be academically humiliated. Soon truancy and being absent become a frequent practice of the student-at-risk. The idea of dropping out, often used by counselors and teachers to intimidate students-at-risk as a desperate maneuver to make them react and hopefully change, is in fact perceived by the student as salvation, or at the very least, as an appealing alternative.

The argument of perceiving the student-at-risk as a suffering adolescent in school is supported by the fact that after dropping out, a significant number of students augment their self-esteem (Whelage & Rutter, 1987) and reduce frustrations and conflicts leading to diminished delinquent behavior (Elliot & Voss, 1974);.

This being the case, authors more and more turn to internal causes (school related factors) to explain the dropout situation (Mayhood, 1981; Hodkinson, 1985; Task Force on the New York State Dropout Problem, 1985; Knight, 1987). The literature reviewed failed to explain why the national concern for lowering the number of dropouts and the general concern for identifying and helping students-at-risk has been unsuccessful in producing major changes in schools to meet the needs of students-at-risk.

In conclusion, the review of the literature suggests that looking for clues to achieve academic excellence through the understanding of students-at-risk and dropouts is a positive method.

Successful Methods

In trying to understand how one can we approach the world of academic excellence, we have reviewed characteristics of

students-at-risk, and the causes that make these students leave school. The process by which a student who is at-risk moves toward academic excellence is like a journey which starts at one end, where the student drops-out of school, and continues in the opposite direction through the area of risk, passes through the middle, where the risk may start, and continues to the right through an area of quality towards academic excellence (See Fig. 4).

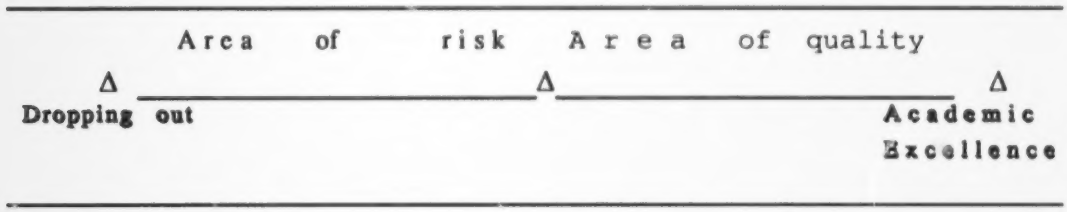

Fig. 4 *Area of risk and area of quality.*

Before we attempt to identify characteristics of programs that reported being successful in curtailing either dropouts or the degree of risk at which students are, it is essential to recall that the objective of this study is to understand the process through which students separate themselves from academic excellence.

Students-at-risk lie at many different points along the area of risk. Each and everyone of these students requires, most likely, a different strategy. Thus, the literature reviewed warns that no single approach will work for everyone every time (Williams, 1985; Hamilton, 1986; Hahn and Danzberger, 1987; Wittenberg, 1988). The many characteristics attributable to effective prevention programs that are school based can be divided into three categories: organizational, curricular, and relational.

Those variables directly depending on the organization of the program frequently mentioned in the literature as the key to identifying successful programs were:

1) Teachers and staff that are well trained in understanding the student-at-risk phenomenon and are committed to help (Rhodes & McMillan 1987).

2) Program autonomy. Most of the programs considered successful had a relative degree of autonomy (Adwere-Boamah, 1976; Lotto, 1982).

3) Individualization of the instruction to adapt to students' learning style, and the promotion of a cooperative group setting among students reported a greater degree of efficiency (Lotto, 1982; Grossnickle, 1986; Peck et.al., 1987).

4) Small size of the program. A total program size of 25 to 60 students using two to six instructors, was another attribute associated with effective programs (Institute of Educational Leadership, 1986).

5) Team teaching was more efficacious than traditional instruction. (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1988).

6) A program of incentives was another common feature (Hahn and Danzberger, 1987; Education Commission of the States, 1988; Garibaldi, 1988).

7) Year-round schools are suggested in two valuable studies by Duhl & Duhl (1984), and Hahn (1985). This research found that students that were tested at the beginning and at the end of the summer actually diminished their scores. These results has prompted some experts to suggest a year-round school as an alternative to support students-at-risk.

8) A more rigorous drop-out accountability for individual schools. All schools utilizing any kind of system to identify and assist dropouts were recognized as more successful in reducing the dropout rate and helping students-at-risk (Ramirez, et.al. 1988).

9) Community involvement, business involvement, and parental participation was a recommendation constantly made for all programs considered to have obtained a degree of success (Man, 1986; Sanchez & Ochoa, 1987; Sealy, & Riffel, 1985; Hahan & Danzberger, 1987).

10) Early identification. Though no conclusive research has been performed to gain consensus as to how early a student-at-risk can be identified, some studies suggest that a student-at-risk can be distinguished as early as the elementary level (Hodkinson, 1985; & DeRidder, 1988). Using this evidence, many studies endorse early identification as a crucial part of any program (Gruskins, et.al., 1987; Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast & Islands, 1987; Texas Education Agency, 1988; Wittenberg, 1988).

Recommendations related to curriculum included:

1) Nontraditional curricula. An individualized approach, particularly in math and writing, is recommended as essential by the Institute for Educational Leadership (1986). The same report recommends cooperative learning to reinforce interdependence. Other studies reviewing effective programs for students-at-risk concur with the idea of emphasizing nontraditional curricula (Self, 1985; Druian, 1986).

2) Experiential Education. Evidently, the student-at-risk moves to the right in the area of risk (See Fig. 4) when school programs have a link to the external community and/or

to vocational programs (Yates, 1979; Asher, 1985; Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986; Baherman & Kopp, 1988).

The relational recommendations are associated to the affective domain. That is, they pertain to the improvement of a student's self-esteem with support from counselors, teachers, and staff.

1) Provide a positive atmosphere and supportive peer culture. Numerous studies emphatically suggest the creation of a supportive atmosphere in the classroom and the school as one of the most important strategies to retain and support students-at-risk (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986; Gruskin & Campbell, 1987; Ralph, 1988).

2) Mentorship and Counseling. Probably there is not another topic so recurrently mentioned as the importance of counseling and teachers expanding their role to that of an educator willing to address a students' personal concerns. (New York City Board of Education, 1985; Howe, 1987; Mills, et.al., 1988).

Urban superintendents collectively endorsed a program that also included recommendations to intervene early, create a positive school climate, set high expectations, select and develop strong teachers, and provide flexibility in the curriculum (OERI Urban Superintendents Network, 1987).

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Academic excellence is a term that encompasses a wide variety of modes of student achievement. Excellence is exemplified by a student's identification of high standards with any of the academic disciplines or pursuits with which he is associated. By definition, it is the opposite extreme of dropping out. In considering the cycle of failure in

which a student-at-risk's situation is exacerbated, there are several areas that stand out because of their concurrent position in the cycle of success that is quintessential in academic excellence.

The factors that influence students-at-risk are in many respects the same ones that play a role in creating and maintaining academic excellence: self-esteem, recognition from authority figures, family relationship, and respect accorded by a student's peer group. The outcome, though, of academic excellence is commonly the acceptance and success of a student in society. It is important to examine the parallels and differences in the phenomena of dropping-out and academic excellence.

As with students-at-risk, there are both internal (school-related) and external (family and economic) causes and reinforcers in academic excellence. Internally, students have the opportunity to build on successes in much the same way that students-at-risk are constantly confronted with failure. This is why the route to academic excellence starts when the basic problems of dropouts and students-at-risk are understood. One can extrapolate the stages through which a student moving towards academic excellence goes through by simply analyzing previously mentioned stages that students at risk experienced. (See Fig. 5).

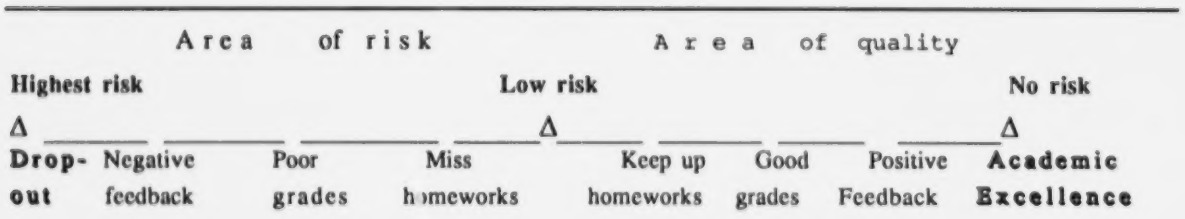

Figure 5 *Recognizable stages of school performance.*

This assumption is based on internal (school-related) factors because academic excellence is a concept in which components are dictated, implemented, and evaluated by school organizations.

Minority students face a particularly difficult situation, in part both because of the lack of role models and because of language difficulties. New hypotheses are emerging with respect to minorities, bilingualism and academic excellence, all of which have particular implications for school curricula and educational policy. For example, when pondering the question of what makes some Hispanic disadvantaged students achieve more highly than their fellow disadvantage students, So (1987) concluded that a high achieving disadvantaged student is one who aspires a set of values representative of those of the middle class, as well as one who maintains strong communicative skills with and within the Hispanic culture. Other authors concur with this view, contending the importance of strengthening ethnic programs and bilingual education. These authors have also recommended actively recruiting minority teachers, counselors and staff in order to provide a climate supporting role models reflecting academic excellence in schools (Cummins, 1989; Hernández-Chavez, 1989; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1989; Trueba, 1989).

A review of research performed by Mills, et.al. (1987) on programs which target greater achievement indicates the following factors as most influential:

1) Classroom learning and motivational atmosphere is maintained.

2) High teacher expectations.

3) Teacher stress levels remain low.

4) The overall school climate is positive.

5) The level of understanding of different thinking process functions at different mood levels.

It is interesting to note that these recommendations are fully compatible, and in fact in some cases are almost duplicate, to those made by programs specifically designed to reduce the proportion of students-at-risk who drop out. Both in practical details and overall philosophy, programs that aim encourage high achievement and retain at-risk students are strikingly similar.

In attempting to understand the differences between low and high achievers, some high achieving students have suggested that academic excellence is related to students having (Cuellar, 1989):

1) Friends and peer acceptance.

2) Interest in school as a whole, and not only on academic issues.

3) The approval of teachers, administrators, staff and other authority figures.

4) Support from all or some members of their family.

5) Recognition and incentives for school work of any kind.

6) Better counseling.

7) Periodic feedback.

8) More flexibility in planning individualized curriculum.

9) Participation in interdisciplinary academic projects.

When a school can encourage in students several of the attitudes mentioned (acceptance among peers, and a positive interest in schools as a whole), as well as provide some of the services that were suggested (support for interdisciplinary projects, recognition for achievement, and stepped-up counseling), then it can aid students-at-risk in moving to the area of quality at the same time that it strengthens the achievement-oriented practices that lead to academic excellence (see Fig. 6).

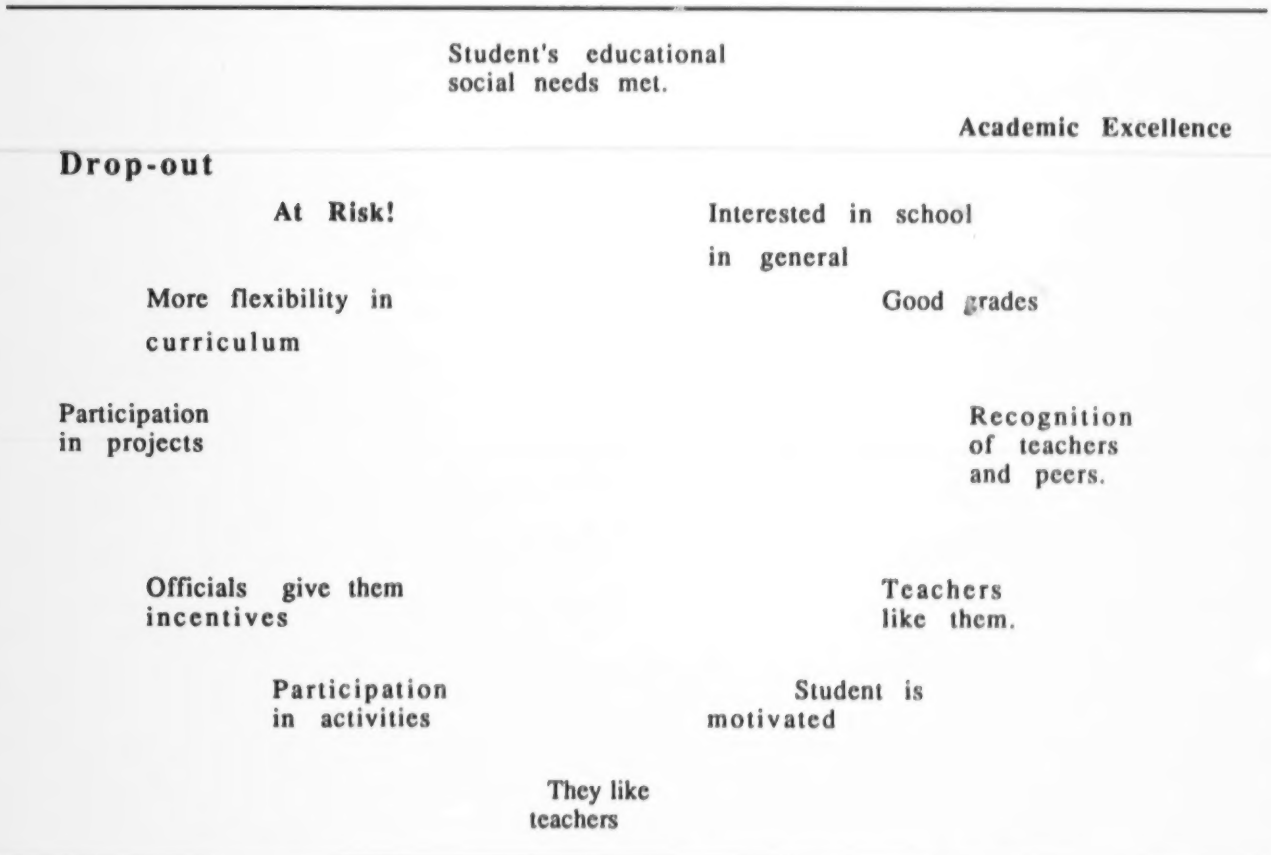

Fig. 6 *The winner's circle of academic excellence.*

The shared characteristics of support programs for students-at-risk and students moving towards academic excellence are important at two levels. First, it allows schools to plan their overall educational strategy not in terms of segregated programs that will benefit only specific segments of the student population, but in terms of a unified educational strategy and philosophy that will boost the overall quality of education. Yet perhaps most significantly, the fact that support programs for students-at-risk and students experiencing and moving to academic excellence can be similar to such a degree suggests that there are certain qualities that are shared by both groups of students. Furthermore, there are specific abilities and characteristics that can be developed in both groups for a positive outcome.

Despite the seriousness of the problem concerning how best to promote academic excellence in America's educational system, and regardless of the hundreds of documents addressing the topic of students-at-risk, there are still many unanswered questions which hamper the possibility of advancing towards this worthy goal.

Research has not been conclusive in explaining the causes or circumstances surrounding the dropout phenomenon (Bailin, 1987). Research has been extremely limited insofar as suggesting direct connections between students-at-risk and academic excellence, and many fundamental questions have not been answered. What makes a student that is in a socioeconomic or minority group that is disproportionately represented in students at risk at-risk be a winner? What makes certain teachers unique and most influential in helping students-at-risk? Why do certain schools collectively move away from excellence despite marked advantages, while others are successful in producing excellence even though they serve a disadvantaged student population?

The problem is so acute that the urgency to implement policy does not permit the educational community to digest the problem and its implications. Thus, they prescribe different therapies without a thorough understanding of the phenomenon.

The same conditions force researchers and administrators to use evidence and studies dealing with places and conditions foreign from their own environments, therefore limiting practical results (Gastright, 1988).

Ethnographic studies are underrepresented in this area, in part because they require a prime time that is not congruent with the exigency of the situation. Nevertheless, ethnographic methods produce conclusions that are more descriptive than predictive, and possibly provide a clearer view of the causes *behind* certain phenomena. It is hoped that more systematic research efforts will bear fruits in the future for a through understanding between the process of being-at-risk and academic excellence.

Unquestionably, there exists a relationship between being at-risk and experiencing academic excellence. Both the students themselves as well as the programs that support them have areas of commonality. Any research agenda for education in the next two decades must include investigation into the parallels and differences between students-at-risk and students exhibiting academic excellence. Perhaps the gap between the two is less wide than it would seem.

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